

I didn't actually attend my first Presidential inauguration until 1996, my first year in congress. This inauguration was my fourth; and each one I have attended has been special and uniquely American displays of patriotism and peaceful transitions of power. But I will tell you—even if I live to see another 20 inaugurations, none will compare to the excitement and historical significance of this one.

The day began early and hopefully. I ran in the morning, using my Member of Congress I.D. to enable me to gain access to restricted areas. Movement itself was very difficult; not just because of the road blocks, traffic control and security...but just the mass of people. I ran down to Fourth Street on the Mall, which was the break between the quarter million people that were ticketed, and the other end of the Mall that was open to millions more. Standing on the barricade, looking down to the Washington Monument, were people, people just packed for as far as I could see.

At one point, I went outside the barricades just to feel what the crowds were like. In just a matter of seconds, I realized it was a mistake if I was going to make it back to the Capitol to make it to my assigned seat; I was at risk of being swallowed up by this happy, joyous and amazing crowd. So I returned to my office to change out of my running clothes and assemble with members of Congress. Even the trek back to my office was fun; it was almost like finding a needle in a haystack when I saw some fellow Oregonians streaming through to fill their places.

I made it to the assembly where Members of Congress assembled at 10 a.m., and filed out through the Capitol and then onto the platform where the ceremony took place. For the better part of an hour, as they were organizing the official party to come through—the Supreme Court, the Cabinet, former Presidents—Members of Congress, Governors and assorted other dignitaries, I suppose you would call them, were arranged in a large horseshoe formation in tiers that rise up. My view was looking over the President and out over the Mall. You could see that same crowd that I saw, but now bigger, more vast.

On the rostrum it was kind of a festive, collegial attitude. The members of the new President's team were introduced, and the treatment that was given to our fellow House and Senate Members now part of the Cabinet was especially loud. There were lots of shouts, cheers, and comments—sort of treating them like rock stars. As Rahm Emanuel came and took his seat on the aisle, lots of his former House Members were cheering him, some saying that he had better be good to them because they needed him now. As somebody was making fun of him, he turned and thumbed his nose at them with a big smile on his face.

After an hour-and-a-half, everybody was feeling that bone-chilling cold. Our movement was restricted and we had to sit most of the time. The chill was inevitable, but you were thinking about the two million in front of you who had been out there since 4AM or longer and it was a shared experience that added a punctuation-point to the day.

The ceremony itself was brief and to the point. Our new President got serious in a hurry. His speech was measured and somber and it didn't have some of the rhetorical flourishes that you know he is capable of. But, he didn't pull any punches even with Bush seated just behind him; he was clear about some of the excesses, problems and missteps. The directness was interesting to observe.

Former President Bush didn't show much emotion, though he did stand and clap when our new President made a very forceful statement about America's determination to be strong and resist forces of evil. What I liked was that he was characteristically dealing with the big picture: a new effort the rebuild America; sensitive to our responsibilities at home and abroad; sensitive to the environment; and, sensitive to each other. It was an amazing sendoff.

As I went back into the office I felt this emotional tug to sit down and process what I had seen and I felt this intellectual tug to start sorting out what we are going to do. But for the time being, it was an afternoon of celebration. Nothing could take away from the positive, bipartisan attitude that filled the air.